



**TONY OURSLER:
THE DARKEST COLOR INFINITELY AMPLIFIED**

JULY 13–OCTOBER 31, 2000

WHITNEY

Whitney Museum of American Art

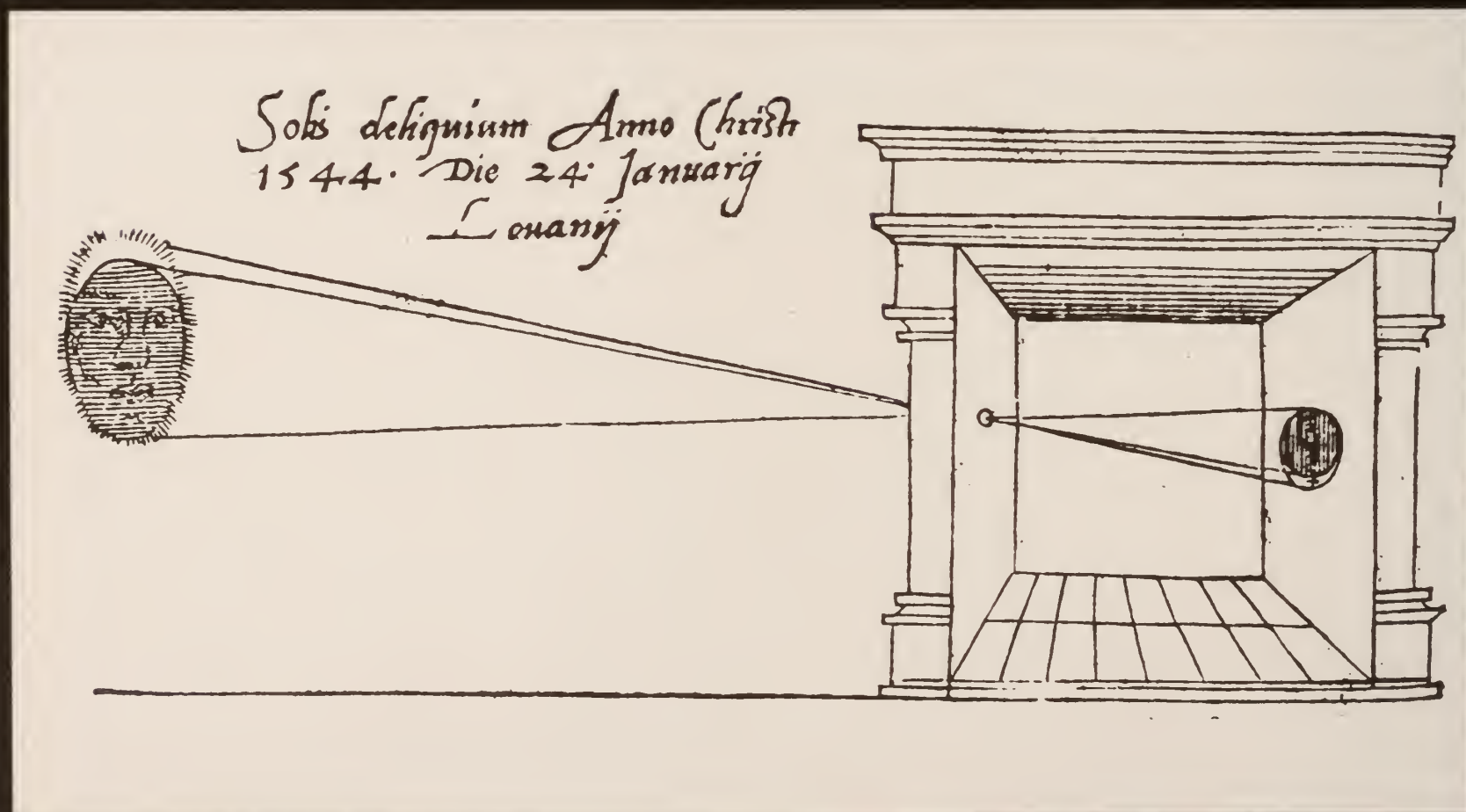
The Darkest Color Infinitely Amplified is a new work by Tony Oursler that has been commissioned by the Whitney Museum. In this installation, Oursler makes use of High Definition Volumetric Display, a new imaging technology that allows both three-dimensional images and two-dimensional video projections to appear in free space, floating in midair.

The installation considers the history of the *camera obscura*—not a camera in the modern sense, but literally a “dark room.” It is an optical device whose properties were first documented in China in the fifth century BCE. In the camera obscura’s simplest form, when a lit area and a darkened area are separated by a wall with a pinhole-size opening, the image of the lit area is projected in inverted form onto the opposite wall of the darkened area.

Oursler is interested in the way technology can make us feel uneasy in the world and in the fears we attribute to that uneasiness. For centuries, scientists and artists used the camera obscura to investigate vision and linear perspective, but less knowledgeable people thought it was the work of magic or devils.

Fascinated by these old dialectics of good and evil, science and magic, Oursler applied them to new technologies, creating a room-size optical illusion populated by magicians, devils, and other makers of special effects. Oursler then uses video “magic” such as editing, slow motion, and freeze-frames to dissect what we see and show us the “tricks” behind the illusion.

By projecting an image from one place to another, the camera obscura—as well as all the optical projection devices that followed—prove that what we see does not always correspond to a physical presence around us, that our senses can be deceived to the point where perception is completely dissociated from reality. The anxiety this realization can provoke has been popularized today in science-fiction accounts of the dangers of a truly virtual reality. But a fear of the virtual has existed for as long as we have had the power to deceive with effects of light. By combining both old and new technology and iconography, *The Darkest Color Infinitely Amplified* reminds us that our current anxiety over the distinction between “real” and “virtual” has a long history.



First published illustration of a *camera obscura*, showing the observation of a solar eclipse at Louvain, Belgium, 1544. Gernsheim Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin

TONY OURSLER

AND

MAXWELL L. ANDERSON

A CONVERSATION



Following are excerpts from a conversation between Tony Oursler and Whitney Museum director Maxwell L. Anderson, which took place during the course of the filming and production of *The Darkest Color Infinitely Amplified*.

MAXWELL L. ANDERSON: In many of your earlier video sculptures, you project images onto the three-dimensional surface of an inert object, such as a doll, so you've long tried to create video entities that exist in space rather than inside a monitor or on a screen. Is this installation a fulfillment of an earlier impulse or is it a departure?

TONY OURSLER: It's really a continuation of a process. I've always been interested in the idea of removing the image from the "corporate lock" of the television box. It's very restricting to be limited to one shape. *The Darkest Color Infinitely Amplified* is also an extension of the development of technology in general. Moving images have been spilling out into real space outside of the domestic setting—into architecture, into clothing, into art galleries. I think that it's part of this drive to get the moving image as ubiquitous as wall paint, and eventually we're going to see that happen.

MLA: What does the title mean?

TO: As I was hanging around Dimensional Media Associates [the company that has patented High Definition Volumetric Display], talking to some of their engineers, they mentioned that they need to block the ambient light in the room from entering their apparatus. They use a light block that infinitely amplifies the darkest color in that system. I thought it was an appropriate metaphor for the camera obscura and its gothic quality—to take the dark side of consciousness and extend it to its farthest degree in a bridge between the unconscious and reality.

MLA: The camera obscura is a device that's existed for centuries. How did you become interested in it?

TO: A lot of my work is about contemporary relationships between individuals or groups and media structures, and over the past two years I've started to research their antecedents—the history of what I call deep media. I fell into this by researching the development of television, and I went into an obsessive research binge, which led me to write an entire timeline about the history of media from my point of view. And it seems that the first virtual images were created by using this simple technology called the camera obscura. By poking a small hole in any dark chamber, light will enter it and create a virtual image. It's the basis for all sorts of media inventions. It's also the basis for the way the eye works, so there's an interesting connection between the body and the camera. But for me, I see the roots of the camera obscura moving through time, all the way into this High Definition Volumetric Display, because a lot of the principles and the display setup are very similar to the camera obscura. You have a kind of imaging system and a hole through which it's viewed—or actually the three-dimensional image comes out through the hole into space. Metaphorically, it's exactly like the camera obscura.

MLA: This sounds a little bit like magic. Magic today is seen as entertainment, but you are actually instilling a degree of concern or trepidation in viewers about what they are seeing, which in some way is magical. Is that accurate?

TO: There's always been a magic quality to technology and to virtual images, a willing suspension of disbelief. People want to be in the dark. Magic has always been a formalized display of the perceptual limits of the human body. Today, this is the same role played by

mimetic technology, such as cinema, television, and video. Magicians were instrumental in developing the technology that gave birth to cinema, which, tragically, eventually eclipsed them. The cinematic desire to conjure up otherworldly images actually goes back to the magician. If you look at the history of cinema, people begin with the Lumière Brothers or Georges Méliès about a century ago, but really virtual play space goes back seven hundred years at least, which tends to be ignored by historians. I found incredible examples of it in my research. We know of thirteenth-century plays where the characters are outside in the sunlight but the audience is inside a dark room, and the lens of a camera obscura focuses the image of these characters on a sheet. To the medieval audience, this was magic. The magician is also an interesting character because he plays horrifying tricks, such as decapitating a woman, but he makes it safe for the audience in the same way that media does. I filmed two really amazing magicians doing simple routines that will float in the installation space—deconstructed in a way. I'm using slow motion and reverse action to

play with the idea of how technology can be used to trick you and reinterpret situations.

MLA: You use devils, both in your recent work and in this installation at the Whitney. What takes you from a magician to a devil?

TO: It's an interesting connection. One of the things I find fascinating is that the advent of most technologies polarizes the public. For instance, the Internet is this new portal into a domestic space, and some fear that there are all sorts of things that could get into your house and corrupt you and your family. But at the same time, technology is associated with human potential. You can do anything with the Internet—so of course you can do all these horrible things as well. The personification of evil comes out of this flux between light and dark. So what better for a magician to conjure up but a devil? If it works, the icon of the devil becomes a psychological projection of the viewer's negative potential, a dark mirror of sorts. Contrary to expectations, however, the devil could be a comic character even back in



Tony Oursler, Still from *The Darkest Color Infinitely Amplified*, 2000. Video and mixed-media installation, dimensions variable. Commissioned by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

the Middle Ages, and can be a very horrific character today if we look at a movie such as *The Exorcist*. I worked with a special-effects makeup artist to transform actress Tracy Leipold into a creature reminiscent of the possessed girl in *The Exorcist*. Tracy's performance is both funny and scary. She asks the viewers to consider their position in relation to evil and the mimetic apparatus. As I started to look back at the history of media, I found that the earliest images of the camera obscura were often associated with demons. I used these images as the basis for the glass figures produced for this installation. From the beginning, virtual spaces were designed as a play space where the viewer can work out various archetypal themes. The position of the viewer in the world of mediated space is always going to shift. The viewer is always going to code and decode these images that stream endlessly from the spectacle. So this installation was a way for me to look at this giant block of history and see how we codify it. What stands out is the play of dark and light, which is the theme of *The Darkest Color Infinitely Amplified*.

MLA: So there's the binary structure—the opposition of light and dark, heaven and hell, good and evil. What about man and woman? You have a nude man and woman in this installation. What are their roles?



Tony Oursler, Still from *The Darkest Color Infinitely Amplified*, 2000

TO: They stand in for the body. They're an extension of the audience, of the desires of the audience. They move around in the space as potential sexuality. They also evoke a kind of duality, on and off, like a binary structure—01100111....I've often thought about the separation between the head and the body in media as a kind of dissociator, a kind of fracture of the body and of consciousness, breaking things down and reorganizing them in virtual space. This is something I'm trying to get at with these figures, because they won't be seen as individual figures. They'll be broken up onto different screens and into different spaces. The whole thing is organized in a mosaic that occasionally comes together, sort of like pixels.

MLA: It's an interesting collision. You allow the technology to be linked to a historical antecedent, and you allow the illusion to be exploded by revealing some of the technology in the installation. It's ambitious. Do you think it's going to affect the way you work in the future? Do you think that other artists will be galvanized by this installation and want to explore free space projection as a new medium?

TO: I can only speak for myself. The installation has allowed me to move in a new direction, particularly with image making. This piece connects virtual images with sculpture in a way that I'd never really thought of. It's set up so that you can project two-dimensional video images as well as three-dimensional objects, and each type retains its characteristics even while floating in space. So for me it's a perfect way to blend the two- and three-dimensional together. I've always felt that there's a kind of battle between those two worlds in my work or, to be more precise, between virtual space and its impact on real space—real life. I also think that artists and people in media are dying to work with three-dimensional images, but I don't like viewing glasses or headsets. The beauty of *The Darkest Color Infinitely Amplified* is that it looks better....

MLA: With no head gear.

TO: With no head gear, so phenomenologically it's also really incredible. You actually *feel* how differently you see. Your vision is more cinematic.

MLA: You get a little dizzy if you spend enough time.

TO: Yeah, you get a little dizzy....

Selected One-Artist Exhibitions

1982

"A Scene," P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York

1985

"Sphères d'Influence," Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

1991

"Poison Candy, Dummies, Designer Drugs," Diane Brown Gallery, New York

1993

"White Trash and Phobic," Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva (traveled to: Kunst-Werke Berlin)

1994

Lisson Gallery, London

"Dummies, Flowers, Alters, Clouds, and Organs," Metro Pictures, New York

1996

Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego

"My Drawings 1976–1996," Kasseler Kunstverein, Kassel, Germany

1997

CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux (traveled to: Sala de Exposiciones Rekalde, Bilbao, Spain)

1998

"Videotapes, Dummies, Drawings, Photographs, Viruses, Light, Heads, Eyes, and CD-ROM," Kunstverein Hannover, Germany (traveled to: Malmö Konsthall, Sweden; City Gallery Wellington, New Zealand; Tel Aviv Museum of Art)

1999

"Introjection: Tony Oursler Mid-Career Survey 1976–1999," Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts, and Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams (traveled to: Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Des Moines Art Center)

Selected Bibliography

Malsch, Friedemann, ed. *Tony Oursler: Dummies, Clouds, Organs, Flowers, Watercolors, Videotapes, Alters, Performances and Dolls* (exhibition catalogue). Frankfurt am Main: Portikus; Strasbourg, France: Les Musées de la Ville de Strasbourg; Geneva: Centre d'Art Contemporain; Eindhoven, The Netherlands: Stedelijk Van Abbe Museum, 1995.

Oursler, Tony, and Bernhard Balkenhol, eds. *Tony Oursler: My Drawings 1976–1996* (exhibition catalogue). Kassel, Germany: Kasseler Kunstverein, 1997.

Rothschild, Deborah, et al. *Introjection: Tony Oursler Mid-Career Survey 1976–1999* (exhibition catalogue). Williamstown, Massachusetts: Williams College Museum of Art, 1999.

Schneider, Eckhard, ed. *Tony Oursler: Videotapes, Dummies, Drawings, Photographs, Viruses, Light, Heads, Eyes, and CD-ROM* (exhibition catalogue). Hannover, Germany: Kunstverein Hannover, 1998.

Sphères d'Influence (exhibition catalogue). Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1985.

Tony Oursler (exhibition catalogue). Essen, Germany: Museum Folkwang, 1989.

Tony Oursler (exhibition catalogue). Essays by Jean-Marc Avrilla and Elizabeth Janus. Bordeaux: CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux, 1997.

Tony Oursler: White Trash and Phobic (exhibition catalogue). Introduction by Elizabeth Janus. Geneva: Centre d'Art Contemporain; Berlin: Kunst-Werke Berlin, 1993.

Tony Oursler: A Written Conversation Between Tony Oursler and Christiane Meyer-Stoll and Tony Oursler and Jim Lewis. 37 Questions (exhibition brochure). San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996.



Tony Oursler, Details of *The Darkest Color Infinitely Amplified*, 2000

The artist would like to thank the following people who assisted in the production of this work:

Exhibition Coordinator: Glenn Phillips

Assistant to Tony Oursler: Lilah Freedland

Performers: Astounding Velma, Queen of Illusion, Kelly Bucola, Aaron Diskin, Tracy Leipold, and Steve Rodman Bewitching Magic
Special-effects makeup: Rick Crane

Glass fabricators: Johnathan Christie, Jane D'Arensbourg, Charlie Lowrie, Justin Parker, and Timothy Ringsmuth

Computer animation: Tim Harrington

Dimensional Media Associates, Inc.: Wen-Kang Chang, Rollando Dizon, Brandon Eggena, Angelo Federico, Peter Miroslaw, Daniel Pfeffer, Peter Raber, Mark Stasiak, Robert D. Summer, and Frank Trocola

Interview recording: Paul Ruest

Interview transcription: Leslie Shaw

Interns: Casson Demmon, Elizabeth Fleming, Banks Griffin, and Pravine Sathe

Dimensional Media Associates, Inc. (DMA) holds the patent for High Definition Volumetric Display, a new imaging technology used in *The Darkest Color Infinitely Amplified* that promises a wide range of future applications, from medical and military use to flight simulation. Tony Oursler worked together with DMA engineers to create this project.

cover: Tony Oursler, Still from *The Darkest Color Infinitely Amplified*, 2000

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